

“Service and Sacrifice: Redefining ‘Us’ and ‘Them’”

UUCGV Sermon by
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Tomorrow, we will celebrate –if that is the right word—Memorial Day. It began as a day set aside after the Civil War by ladies in both the North and South to honor and mourn those who had died in military service. It was formalized as a national holiday by Congress in 1971.

It is a day of death and loss. It is a day of graves and flowers and songs that haunt us, or perhaps taunt us with their melodies and questions, from *“Amazing Grace”* to *“Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”* It is a spiritual day as well as a patriotic civic ritual that transcends time and space as only sacrificial death can. And thus it is sacred. Which is compelling in these dark, uncertain times we find ourselves in: deeply divided, leaderless and beset by a pandemic that has shredded the certainties of our lives into a thousand pieces now blowing in the wind.

I think we need sacred rituals like Memorial Day, now more than ever. We long for what has been noble and good in our country and will be again for our children and grandchildren. But we must ensure that days like this are meaningful and true, that we understand what the dead are telling us. So the central message of Memorial Day –of service and sacrifice—spans past, present and future. It is both mourning -- a form of grief—and hope for better things to come for all of us. But how we see it and celebrate it can differ in striking ways as the videos showed us.

There are three things I want to do with you this morning. First, I want to share some local stories of those who died in the five major wars we have fought over the past century. Then I want to explore more deeply the meaning of “service” and “sacrifice” using their stories as examples, “voices” from the past. Finally, I want to look forward with you to where I hope we are going as citizens of the world; to a reality where the traditional dichotomy of “us” and “them” that has long divided our species is shifting bringing us closer together than ever before.

As you saw in the second video, 123 young men from Mesa County died in World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the War on Terror through 2019. You saw their names and statistics of service. I would now like to bring them to life by sharing a few of their stories with you. As I do, please imagine these young people as sons or brothers of yours, or of your friends and neighbors, past and present, each part of the social fabric of our Grand Valley community.

George Arbey Robbins, was born in 1894, son of Charles and Hattie Robbins, and brother of Hattie, James, Ruth and Rachel. The family lived at 115 South Spruce Street in Grand Junction. A well-known and likeable young man, George worked as a freight clerk for the railroad. He joined the US Army in April 1918 and served as a private in the 89th Infantry Division that had deployed to France. He died on 6 November 1918, five days before the Armistice was declared on 11 November 1918 ending World War I. He was 25.

Homer Copeland Biggs, Jr., was born in 1918, son of Homer and Louise Biggs and brother of Ethel. The family lived at 1202 Chipeta Avenue in Grand Junction. Homer attended Colorado College where he was captain of the football team. He joined the US Army Air Corps in 1941 and served as a 1st Lieutenant and pilot of a B-17 Bomber in the 91st Bomber Group based in England. He died on 13 May 1943 on a bombing mission over France when he bailed out of his stricken aircraft and his parachute failed to open. He was 25.

Clyde Lee Hewitt, was born in 1932, son of Clarence and Ethel Hewitt and brother of Donald and Helen. The family lived at 818 Rood Avenue in Grand Junction. He attended Grand Junction High School and worked as an extractor. He joined the US Army in 1950 and served in Korea as a Private First Class in the 2nd Infantry Division, operating as part of United Nations forces. He died at the Pusan Perimeter Breakout battle on September 17, 1950. He was 18.

Thomas Patrick Doody, was born in 1948, son of Jerry and Thelma Doody and brother of Gerald, Michael, James, Mary Jo, Irene and Nancy. The family lived at 630 West Mesa Avenue in Grand Junction. He attended St. Joseph's Catholic church, and graduated from Central High School and Northwest College in Rangely. He dreamed of becoming a pilot and starting his own business ferrying clients back and forth from Aspen and Vail. He joined the US Army and served in Vietnam as a Warrant Officer and Helicopter Pilot in the 101st Airborne Division. He died on 8 February 1971 when his helicopter was hit and crashed over Laos. He was 23. Years later, Tommy's brother, Jim, built a memorial to commemorate Tommy and all veterans who served from 1959 to 1975. It opened in 2003 in Fruita as the *Western Slope Vietnam Memorial Park*.

Wade James Oglesby, was born in 1979, son of Linda Oglesby and brother of Samantha. He attended Grand Junction High School but dropped out in his Sophomore year to care for his mother who died in 2003. He then moved in with Gary and Sheila Decocq, whom he considered surrogate parents, in order to care for his sister. "He was one of the most unbelievably nurturing men I'd ever met," Sheila Decocq said. He joined the US Army in 2004 and served in Iraq as a Corporal in the 2nd Infantry Division. He died on 18 April 2007 in Taji, Iraq, near Baghdad when an IED detonated near his vehicle. He was 27. He wanted to become a police officer after he was discharged from the Army.

This is the cost of war. This is the physical meaning of sacrifice. But why and for what did these young people die?

For **George Robbins** and the other 9 young men from Mesa County who died in **World War I**, they had been drafted under the Selective Service Act of 1917 passed specifically to raise troops for the war. Future iterations of the draft remained a major factor in determining both service and sacrifice for young men until after the Vietnam War in 1973 when it was ended and military service became all volunteer. Which raises another question: how does a young man “give” his life for something he is “forced to do”.

What happened to this “likeable young man and freight clerk” when he found himself drafted to fight a war far away, against an “enemy” he had never imagined, for reasons hard to understand. Most of the country was reluctant to go to war; volunteers were few. That is until late 1917 when the Federal Government commissioned George Creel, a Denver journalist, to help out. Creel’s *Committee on Public Information*, quickly recruited 75,000 speakers, who made 750,000 four-minute speeches in 5,000 cities and towns across America and was so effective that for families throughout the country,

Every item of war news they saw—in the country weekly, in magazines, or in the city daily picked up occasionally in the general store—was not merely officially approved information but precisely the same kind that millions of their fellow citizens were getting at the same moment. Every war story had been censored somewhere along the line— at the source, in transit, or in the newspaper offices in accordance with ‘voluntary’ rules established by the CPI.

Was Robbins or the others persuaded? We will never know. What we do know is that shortly after being drafted in April 1918, he was assigned to the newly-established 89th Infantry Division which took part in one of the largest offensives of the war at Meuse–Argonne in Northeast France and was among the 26,277 Americans killed there. For what?

For **Homer Biggs** and the other 80 young men from Mesa County who died in **World War II**, the question may have been more relevant. Although the US had declined to join the League of Nations following World War I, and isolationist, “America First” sentiment was strong as the US began to emerge from the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism and the rapid sequence of German victories in Europe in 1940 began to change things. The draft was re-instituted in that year and would eventually induct 10 million young men into the armed forces, 63 percent of those who served.

Then the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in late 1941 changed everything. Biggs joined up, much as my father and Dale Foreman had, and served as bomber pilots flying missions over the South Pacific and Europe where Biggs got shot down and died. All were fighting a war not so far away, against an “enemy” that was terrifyingly real, for reasons easy to understand. For what? Seems clearer.

For **Clyde Hewitt** and the 7 other young men from Mesa County who died in the **Korean War**, the question was more problematic. US involvement in the Korean War –the first major conflict of what had come to be called “the Cold War”-- was through the newly-formed United Nations, not through a direct Declaration of War. Although the draft had been re-instituted in 1948, few young men were inducted until early 1951 when Chinese entry into the Korean War transformed the magnitude of the conflict. Hewitt died in the Pusan Perimeter Breakout, fighting in a war far away, against an “enemy” he, like George Robbins before him, had never imagined, for reasons and a cause that must have seemed largely abstract. For what? Seems unclear.

For **Thomas Doody** and the other 19 young men from Mesa County who died in the **Vietnam War**, the question is more problematic and darker. US involvement had started with attempts to shore up what remained of the French colonial empire in Indochina against a long-standing struggle for independence by Ho Chi Minh and other nationalists whom the US had supported in World War II. By 1964, the French were gone, and the US now viewed Ho Chi Minh and his struggle as puppets of communist Russia and China. By way of the Tonkin Gulf resolution of that year –not a Declaration of War—the US intervened, eventually sending 2.7 million military personnel to Vietnam, approximately 30 per cent of whom were drafted.

Doody died as the US shifted to a strategy of withdrawal, leaving South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) units to do most of the fighting. His helicopter was shot down over Laos on 8 February 1971 while transporting ARVN troops. His was among the 58,209 US deaths and estimated 410,000 Vietnamese civilian deaths caused by US actions in both North and South Vietnam. All 20 of the young men from Mesa County were fighting a war far away, against an “enemy” that was hard to identify, for reasons difficult to understand especially if one did not know the history or the language of this ancient land. “We had to destroy the village in order to save it” is an apt description of the situation. For what? Seems unclear, confusing and still hotly debated to the present day.

For **Wade Oglesby** and the 3 other young men from Mesa County who have died so far in the ongoing **War on Terror**, the question of “why and for what did these young people die?” is both more problematic and even darker. Given the terrorist attack on 9/11 --Pearl Harbor-like in its impact—one would have expected a World War II-like mass response. But that did not happen, partly because a group of terrorists –not a country—had attacked, and partly because within a year of displacing the Taliban and occupying Afghanistan, the US response was to attack and invade Iraq which had played no role in the 9/11 attack. Oglesby and the 3 the others from Mesa County were among the 4,500 young men who have died in Iraq so far. Some 208,000 Iraqi civilians have also died so far.

All 4 of the young men from Mesa County were volunteers fighting a war far away, against an “enemy” that was nearly impossible to identify, for reasons very difficult to understand especially if one did not know the history or languages of this ancient land. For what? Seems nearly impossible to determine and remains highly controversial to this day.

Some closing thoughts.

Eight weeks ago, everything suddenly stopped; the frenzy of modern life paused; the political noise ceased; the distractions faded and the skies cleared. Now, in the hush and quiet of these pandemic days, as families all over the world are huddled together with loved ones, perhaps we can think more clearly. If we listen carefully, perhaps we can hear the voices of the young people who died for us, speaking to each other and to us from their graves. What might they be saying?

George Robbins might be saying that the cost of war was too high, the sacrifice too great; and that the “enemy” turned out to be a manufactured set of beliefs --a *rationale*-- produced by a concept of power devised long ago to divide us into artificial categories of “Us” and “Them”. And he might also have confessed that he and millions of others bought that rationale based on a sales pitch, not on the truth of what it was. “False advertising” we might call it.

Homer Biggs might question this. But he would also be asking his parents why they had not learned the lessons taught by George and his fellow veterans: a peace based on revenge and isolationism does not last; institutions for building world peace must be supported. He would agree that the consequences of not doing these things allowed the rise of new and improved *rationales* of the “enemy” based on more refined categories of “Us” and “Them” marketed with an even more effective sales pitch that almost convinced everyone. It took another war to stop this and to re-discover the truth of international cooperation.

Clyde Hewitt might also agree, but point out that international cooperation was a hard truth, difficult to understand and implement, and always vulnerable to competition from the latest manufactured *rationale* of the “enemy” based on the latest iteration of “Us” and “Them” categories marketed with an even more refined sales pitch.

Thomas Doody would also agree, but point out that he was only trying to apply the lessons learned from his parents --“the greatest generation”-- who had fought so heroically in World War II. But he might also confess that perhaps he had been too caught up in the glory of what his parents had done and lost sight of the realities pointed out by Clyde Hewitt. As a result, he had bought the latest *rationale* of the “enemy,” but found that it was shoddily made and not very reliable. He might also confess that the indirect cost of war --measured in civilian deaths--was far higher than he had expected.

Wade Oglesby, hearing all this would probably also agree, pointing out how flimsy the upgraded *rationale* of the “enemy” had become, and how high the resulting cost of war had become, not in military deaths but in civilian deaths. Feeling lost and overwhelmed, he might confess that no-one understood or paid attention anymore and that the only community he had were his buddies who had been through it with him, many of whom were now dying of suicide.

All might agree that war itself was the “enemy” and that the “Us” and “Them” set of beliefs used to manufacture it was obsolete and counter-productive. Beyond the clean and orderly crosses in cemeteries across the country, they might say, the reality of war is dirty and messy and needs to stop. The cost is too high; no more should die, soldier or civilian. All would agree that we must finally learn the lessons war has taught us; and seriously set about building peace.

At this point, listening even more closely, we might hear a deeper voice, speaking not in the language of politics or economics, but in the language of biology and ecology. It is telling us a timeless truth as it has for centuries, but now with more urgency. It is telling us all that we are more deeply connected to each other and to this planet than we know. That there is no “Them”; there is only “Us” and we must work together, all of us, to face the planetary challenges that lie ahead. Perhaps this is the true meaning of Memorial Day 2020.

And to help me bring this to a close, here is another young man from Mesa County:

[Video of Ben Leinbach playing Taps]